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### My Name is Joe

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Title: *My Name is Joe*

Countries of Origin: Spain/Italy/France/UK/Germany

Year: 1998

Language: English

Production Companies: Alta Films, Arte, Channel Four Films, Degeto Film, Diaphana Films, Filmstiftung Nordrhein-Westfalen, La Sept Cinéma, Parallax Pictures, Road Movies Vierte Produktionen, Scottish Arts Council Lottery Fund, The Glasgow Film Fund, Tornasol Films, Westdeutscher Rundfunk

Filming Locations: Glasgow, Inveraray

Director: Ken Loach

Producers: Ulrich Felsberg, Rebecca O'Brien

Screenwriter: Paul Laverty

Cinematographer: Barry Ackroyd

Art Director: Fergus Clegg

Editor: Jonathan Morris

Runtime: 105 minutes

Cast (Starring): Peter Mullan, Louise Goodall, Gary Lewis

**Synopsis:** Joe Kavanagh is an unemployed recovering alcoholic in his late thirties, a man forced, like many of his neighbours, to live an emotionally and economically exposed existence in a dilapidated, drug-ridden public housing scheme in present-day Glasgow. Aided by his best friend, Shanks, Joe seeks to sustain his own self-worth and dignity by helping others to recover their own: he plays a volubly passionate part in local Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and coaches an amateur football team made up of former heroin addicts. Joe's life seems about to change yet further when he meets and then begins a relationship with Sarah, a local health worker involved in the state-sponsored support (but also surveillance) of Liam and Sabine, a young couple attempting to raise a child and stay off drugs. Ultimately, however, hard economic realities strangle heartfelt emotional aspirations. Joe learns that Liam and Sabine are being targeted by McGowan, a local criminal to whom the pair owes money. With no other way to avert impending physical violence – McGowan threatens either to break Liam's legs or make Sabine work as a prostitute – Joe reluctantly agrees to take a temporary job as the gangster's drugs courier. When Sarah discovers this, she immediately disowns him. Heartbroken and enraged, Joe resorts to suicidal measures, publicly assaulting McGowan and his goons and then embarking on an alcohol binge. Liam saves Joe's life by sacrificing his own, hanging himself in order to salve McGowan's wrath. The film then ends on a purposefully ambiguous note: Joe and Sarah are reunited at Liam's funeral, but the future – if any – of their romantic relationship remains unclear.

**Critique:** Right from its very first moments, *My Name is Joe* explores the often strained links between human solidarity and human empathy. The titular character's opening monologue, delivered to an audience of fellow addicts attending an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, describes a damascene moment in which self-recognition and self-projection are predicated upon each other. Joe explains that the potentially liberating ability to acknowledge his own alcoholism stemmed from revelatory exposure to the dignified but unsparing testimony of a fellow sufferer: "I looked at this woman and thought, 'You're me.'" In this way, Ken Loach and Paul Laverty's second feature film collaboration establishes – and simultaneously seeks to justify – the precise manner in which it represents and analyses the systemic socio-economic deprivation that scars the face of present-day urban Scottish society. On one hand, it is perfectly possible to see the narrative's pronouncedly emotional and melodramatic qualities as a distraction from, or dilution of, *My Name is Joe's* ideological concerns. But on the other, the film argues right from its opening scene that one cannot truly stand with other people unless one first sees oneself in them, too; Loach and Laverty frame emotional involvement as the necessary precondition for any meaningful political equivalent.

Because of this fact, *My Name is Joe* also travels a long way towards equating solidarity with class-based values of anarchy. As in several other post-1990 Loach movies (1994's *Ladybird*, *Ladybird*, for example), individual middle-class representatives of the Welfare State harm the dispossessed human objects of their attentions at least as much as they help them. It is no accident that health visitor Sarah is first seen with the back of her car overflowing with rolls of wallpaper. While this is on one level a clever comic/romantic plot device – Joe and Sarah's romance begins after he offers to decorate her flat – it also works to make a much more disquieting ideological point. As the narrative progresses, viewers see how Sarah's well-intentioned social democratic values and actions merely paper over the gaping social cracks opened up by rampant economic inequality, and thus perpetuate rampant social dysfunction rather than challenging it. Her relatively privileged class and economic statuses prevent her from truly understanding, and thus entering into, the world of those that she seeks to help on a daily basis. Most obviously of all, Sarah cannot (or will not) understand Joe's anguished decision to temporarily courier drugs in order to save Liam and Sabine: her personal good fortune in life renders her incapable of comprehending the fact that, in Joe's words, "some people don't have a choice." For Sarah, moral choices and money exist as separate concerns; but as Joe and others who languish at the bottom of the social heap know only too well, the compromised nature of the former are often dictated by a crippling lack of the latter.

Little wonder, then, that self-help is the only real kind of social and spiritual sustenance on offer within *My Name is Joe's* ultimately bleak worldview. Unlike the local medical centre and employment office, Alcoholics Anonymous and the recovering addicts' football team function as non-hierarchical entities within which the disenfranchised and demonised help each other without judgement being passed upon them from above. If the replica West German football strips in which Joe's junkies take to the field of play are in one sense a laughing matter (the team are anything but world-beaters) they also work to make a deadly serious point: Loach and Laverty present modern Scotland as a starkly divided society, all the more so because the walls that divide communities and entire social classes from each other are not always immediately visible to the naked eye. In its

highly sophisticated attempt to marry expert emotional manipulation with a project of highly engaged political agitation, *My Name is Joe* created one of the biggest international critical and commercial successes to emerge from 1990s Scotland. More importantly yet, the film also established a dramaturgical and ideological template that structured all of its creators' subsequent Scottish-set movies.

Jonathan Murray